"Bye-bye Aristide, Chavez you're next!"

Venezuela: Right-wing opposition clamours for another US-backed coup

Mauricio Saavedra
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A wave of political unrest and violence now unfolding in Venezuela bears all the hallmarks of a "made in Washington" destabilisation campaign. In the wake of the US-organized overthrow of Haiti's Jean-Bertrand Aristide, this campaign is aimed at creating an atmosphere of chaos in the oil-rich South American nation, setting the stage for a military takeover and a wave of terror against the working class.

The most recent unrest flared when the country's National Electoral Council (CNE) announced that it could verify only 1.8 million of the 3.1 million petitions a right-wing alliance claimed it gathered to oust Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. A total of 2.4 million signatures are needed to force a plebiscite on Chavez's presidency.

The CNE ruled that 1.1 million signatures needed further verification, while it rejected 140,000 signatures outright, including repeated signatures and the names of long-deceased voters, non-nationals, children and members of the armed forces. The disputed petitions include ones in which details appear to have been completed in the same handwriting.

News of rioting in a country which is the world's fifth-largest oil exporter sent jitters through global markets and drove the price of world crude up to $33.44 a barrel, its highest level since the US-led invasion of Iraq last year. Oil prices shot up on fears that last year's management-provoked three-month-long oil shutdown could be repeated. Oil exports, which account for almost 80 percent of Venezuela's earnings, were brought to a standstill then, resulting in the country's worst-ever economic crisis—GDP contracted 9.2 percent last year, after shrinking 8.9 percent in 2002.

Since February 28, the political violence has left 10 dead, dozens injured and several hundred arrested. Thousands of anti-Chavez forces from the wealthier suburbs of Caracas barricaded the capital's major highway with litter and tyres set alight and battled hundreds of thousands of people who streamed down from poorer quarters to rally in support of the government.

Unable to rely on a police force under the control of opposition politicians, the government has mobilised national guard and army troops, equipped with heavy armoured vehicles, tear gas and rubber bullets. *AFP* reported that police "have patrolled without stepping in as demonstrators burned trash, hurled Molotov cocktails and in some cases opened fire with handguns." Several police officers have since been arrested. The government has also suspended the right to bear arms until March 14, ostensibly to prevent a bloodbath.

Leading members of the multi-party Coordinadora Democratica opposition entered into discussions late last week with the CNE, government officials and international electoral observers on the procedure to verify the signatures.

Even as they continue negotiating, the opposition has not ruled out sidelining the referendum process altogether and unleashing a wave of rioting aimed at provoking a military coup. The Venezuelan president, a former paratrooper himself, stacked the military with handpicked cronies following a US-backed coup that briefly brought a civilian-military junta to power in April 2002. The coup collapsed in the face of mass demonstrations and rioting by supporters of the Chavez government centred in the impoverished neighbourhoods of Caracas. While the military has to date remained silent, the opposition hopes that its efforts may still win the support of commanding officers.

Last weekend's mass rallies organised by the Coordinadora Democratica brought out tens of thousands of demonstrators demanding that the CNE change its proposal on reconfirming the disputed petitions. The CNE wants to set up 1,000 booths from March 18-22 to allow petitioners to authenticate their own signatures. The opposition demands that the CNE instead verify the signatures by checking a "statistically sound random sample," a proposal initially aired by the Organization of American States (OAS).

"This is going to be a logistical nightmare," an observer said. "You're talking about over a million people. We don't even know if it can be done." However, late last year the opposition boasted of having collected three million signatures in just four days, a process that the February 28 issue of the *Economist* said "went smoothly, witnessed by officials from the government, the opposition and the CNE."

The opposition—composed of Venezuela's traditional political parties, the chamber of commerce and manufacturers' association, as well the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers, the country's bureaucratized labour organization—is split over what road to take. While one section is in discussions with the electoral commission, another has denounced the commission as an entity controlled by an autocratic government—a position endorsed by the US administration.

"We have always maintained that the rights of the Venezuelan citizens who have been signing these petitions need to be respected and that the constitutional processes need to be observed," said State Department spokesman Richard Boucher. "The Venezuelan government has, at times, agreed with those rights, but often we've seen activity that we think is not consistent with that."

"We underscore the need for a timely process that facilitates participation and respects the constitutional rights of the Venezuelan citizens who signed the various recall petitions," he added.

Whatever roadblocks Chavez has thrown in the path of the recall

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campaign, the Bush administration that now poses as the champion of democratic procedure itself came to power by halting a Florida vote recount in 2000, and it backed the violent overthrew of Chavez in 2002.

In line with the notion that the Chavez government is trampling upon the democratic rights of the opposition, the OAS and the Carter Center—a think tank established by former US president Jimmy Carter—said in a joint release: "We understand the concerns of the CNE, but the evaluation should start from the presumption of the good faith of the citizen as a universal principle." Their statement followed earlier requests that the CNE not get "bogged down in minor technicalities" and to "respect the will of the people."

The five-man electoral commission is composed of two pro-Chavez and two anti-Chavez officials and a fifth member, the organization's president Francisco Carrasquero, who is ostensibly neutral and casts the deciding vote.

The recall referendum emerged from an accord signed May 29, 2003 by the government, the OAS and the Carter Center, and the Coordinadora Democratica, which after failing to bring down Chavez through extra-parliamentary means opted for an attempt to oust him via an "electoral solution". They agreed to utilise a clause written into the 1999 constitution drafted by the Chavez administration, in which the incumbent must submit to a recall referendum halfway through his term if 20 percent of the electorate request such a vote.

With the possibility that the recall may never see the light of day, another fraction of the opposition, the groupings associated with right-wing terrorist outfits, are itching to wreak havoc.

The March 4 edition of the *San Francisco Chronicle* referred to opposition protesters with banners reading "Bye-bye Aristide, Chavez you're next" and calling for the army to intervene. Dario Azzelini from the Internet site *Venezuelanalysis.com* similarly observed that "leading sectors of Venezuela's opposition hope to stimulate once again a military coup or even a US intervention. A few hundred even demonstrated in front of the US embassy in Caracas in favour of an intervention, holding up signs saying '1 Hussein; 2 Aristide; 3 Chavez.'"

Some have rallied behind Miranda state governor Enrique Mendoza and his police chief Hermes Rojas Peralta, who has strong links to Luis Posada Carriles, a Cuban exile CIA operative who was jailed in Venezuela in connection with the bombing of a Cuban airliner in 1976, killing 73 people, and is now facing charges for attempting to assassinate Fidel Castro in Panama. Also active in this network is a right-wing terrorist group known as the Venezuelan Patriotic Front, and the Miami-based Cuban émigré terrorist front known as the Comandos F4. This last group, the Comandos F4, candidly stated February 28 that it had reactivated the "Latin American Civic-Military Alliance" to "coordinate military expertise and experience and exchange intelligence" on leftists in Latin America.

These fascistic outfits form part of an opposition that has received both covert and overt funding from Washington. According to recent documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, US agencies funnelled over $1 million in April 2002 and another $800,000 since June of the same year to organizations associated with the Venezuelan opposition.

Among the organizations to receive the most funds is the corrupt Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV), which between 1998 and March 2003 had $631,000 channelled through the American Center for International Labor Solidarity—a part of the US government-financed National Endowment for Democracy that is run jointly with the US AFL-CIO labour bureaucracy. The CTV bureaucracy assisted the Venezuelan business association in planning the 2002 coup and in organizing a 12-hour strike/lockout that shut down light industry, banks and the retail sector to demand that Chavez resign.

These forces also enjoy close ties to Bush's chief policy-makers on Latin America, including presidential envoy Otto Reich, US ambassador to Venezuela Charles Shapiro—both were engaged in intimate discussions with the putschists prior to and during the military overthrow of Chavez two years ago—and Roger Noriega, who last September replaced Reich as Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs.

Shapiro and Reich are linked to the massacres and assassinations carried out by El Salvador's military-backed death squads, as well as to Lt. Col. Oliver North's illegal network for funding the "contra" war against Nicaragua in the 1980s. Noriega, a newer Republican apparatchik, began his career as an aide to the extreme anti-communist senator from North Carolina, Jesse Helms, and was then tapped as Washington's permanent representative to the OAS.

What characterizes all of these officials is their pathological hatred of socialism, democracy and the international working class. They are ideologically committed to a foreign policy directed at quashing any attempt, no matter how meagre, to shift wealth and power away from the multinational corporations and the native oligarchies.

A case in point is Chavez, elected twice with the largest popular margins in Venezuelan history on promises of agrarian reform and reducing entrenched poverty. He has earned Washington's ire through his populist rhetoric, friendly ties to Cuba's Fidel Castro, opposition to the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas and his refusal to carry out the privatization of Venezuela's giant state-owned oil company, PDVSA.

Yet "emerging market bond investors like Chavez in power because they know he's going to continue to service the debt," a Deutsche Bank economist observed recently. Moreover, Chavez has overseen a redrafting of the constitution in 2000 that "liberalized foreign investment laws and strengthened the economy's capitalist foundation." That is, his railing against neo-liberalism notwithstanding, he is implementing the demands of the foreign banks and international financial institutions.

Despite this, the US-backed Venezuelan putschists are clamouring for Washington to intervene, as they attempt to create a political climate akin to the one that existed in Haiti on the eve of the anti-Aristide coup.

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